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'At first I saw it as a toy': life stories, social consciousness and music ethnography

Ioannis Tsioulakis*

Abstract: *This article examines the role of life narratives as discursive spaces for the performance of individual resistance. Through the inspection of three interviews with professional musicians in Athens, the essay will illustrate how the recounting of nodal events in their lives and careers facilitates an assertion of their current social ideology and their disillusionment with the popular music industry in which they operate. Ultimately, what follows will suggest a mode of listening to individual utterances and narratives as discursive forms of resistance that need to be appreciated as social acts as opposed to mere ethnographic data.*

Keywords: *ethnomusicology, Greece, professional musicians, narrative, discursive resistance, power and social ideology.*

'So how do we start? What do you want to know?' asked Kostas; the two sentences separated by a good sip of iced coffee. It was he who chose this suburban café for our interview. He thought it would be quiet and hopefully breezy enough for an Athenian July evening and he was right. 'Well, you could start from the beginning', I replied. 'When did you first hold a musical instrument?' 'What, you mean as a child?' he enquired, evidently confused about the relevance of such a question. 'I don't know...were you a child?' I answered with a further question. 'I sure was, still in primary school. A guitar was brought to my house, don't even remember by whom. So, at first, I saw it as a toy. And come to think of it, this is what keeps me going until today. I saw music as "playing" from the beginning.'

The first contact with music served as the subject of my initial question in all the 34 interviews that I carried out with professional musicians in Athens, Greece. This question, I initially thought, served as a good ice-breaker. But I soon realised that it was far more significant than that. It had something 'journalistic' about it, a character which served two purposes: Firstly, it gave the discussion an identifiable form ('oh, it's going to be like one of those TV interviews huh?' I remember one informant saying). Secondly, and most importantly, it allowed my interlocutors to imagine themselves in a position of power, a rather rare occurrence for a backing instrumentalist. This interview was a discursive space where their stories mattered. Once they realised that, my informants were not only eager to respond in great detail, but they went on covering the whole spectrum of enquiries included in my research agenda through a straightforward (if lengthy) life narrative. And they did not hold back.

A combination of memories, ideologies, professional strategies, betrayed and accomplished expectations, and aspirations for the future sprung out of their narratives in a way synthesising and transcending my preconfigured questions.

The life of the individual has occupied an ambiguous role in ethnographic research and writing. On the one hand, cultural/social constructivist approaches have focused on individual life stories as a terrain where social phenomena become tangibly manifest and observable. As Pierre Bourdieu famously argued, the particularity of empirical reality serves social sciences inasmuch as it is 'an exemplary case in a world of finite possible configurations' (1996: 8). Conversely, poststructuralist anthropological literature has tended to focus on individual agency, seeing sociocultural phenomena as dialogical processes which are being actively negotiated by human action and discourse.¹ Recently, even poststructuralist approaches to agency have been criticised as unproductive as far as the power and autonomy of the individual is concerned.² The tension between societal constraint and individual imaginaries,³ however, is not a figment of social theory. Michael Jackson has illustrated that the examination of this struggle should be in the centre of an existential anthropology. In his words,

life is a struggle between one's inner resources and external conditions. Expressed in a more existential vein, one might say that human existence is a struggle to strike some kind of balance between being an actor and being acted upon. (2005: 143)

In this light, life narratives need to be seen as privileged spaces within which one can observe how these kinds of struggles unfold. Anthropology has conceptualised and utilised life-narratives in diverse ways. Narrative has been described both as 'the form in which we come to consciousness' (Rapport 2003: 29), and as a performance (Bauman 1977).⁴ Life-narratives, more than simple illustrations of events, serve as active constructions of selfhood and claims to individual authority (Josephides 1998). In accordance with these views, I attempted to examine life-narratives as strategies through which musicians cope with the existential struggles involved in their everyday activities.

This article draws upon my three-year-long doctoral research among Athenian professional instrumentalists (Tsioulakis 2011a). Focusing on 'backing musicians'⁵ of the local popular music

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industry, my research illustrated the divisions of power and sociocultural ideologies implicated in Athenian music-making. Throughout my analysis I argued that professional musicians construct a dualism of 'work' versus 'play', where the former describes their experience of powerlessness and constraint within the professional milieu, while the latter speaks to their momentary glimpses of 'creative freedom' in contexts where they can perform music for their own pleasure. The dichotomy of 'freedom' and 'constraint' is also inextricably connected to the sociality that is being performed. 'Work' is where a musician needs to satisfy his or her superiors and build the appropriate personal relationships that will lead to professional advancement. 'Play' on the other hand, is arguably where musicians get to express their true social selves.

The examination of life stories has been pivotal in my endeavour to document these experiences and ideologies in two ways: in their descriptive and sequential capacity, life stories illustrated the way that this oscillation between 'work' and 'play' defined my informants' life choices and the construction of their identities. At the same time, seen as discursive constructs, the narratives provided strong manifestations of current individual ideologies. My essay will focus on this latter aspect of life narrative and its importance for the ethnographic process. Specifically, through the examination of extracts from three life stories I will discuss how my informants used our interviews as modes of *discursive resistance*. This term relates to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'heteroglossia' (1981: 291) and to James Scott's (1990) notion of the 'hidden transcript': the dissonant, subversive discourse that develops among subaltern groups away from the gaze of the power-holders. Simultaneously, the term draws on the theoretical field of discourse analysis and its attentiveness to speech-acts as modes of (re)constructing the social world. As Margaret Wetherell asserts, a discourse 'is constitutive of social life [...] discourse builds objects, worlds, minds and social relations.' (2001: 16). The consistency of the way that power-holders are portrayed within the musicians' narratives suggests a use of language as an instrument of opposition. In this sense, the utterances presented in this text serve as counter-narratives to the dominant social order of the Athenian music industry. Even if life narratives do not have the potency to reverse social orders, this essay will argue that they still serve musicians as negations of the power schemes within which they operate.⁶

Kostas: from 'bands' to 'work' – the instrumentalist's role

Kostas, the musician whose words feature in the title of this article, is a professional bass player in his late thirties. Although he has 'worked' in diverse musical contexts serving different styles and genres, he started (and continues to identify himself) as a rock-band

bassist. Elaborating on his opening declaration that music was always 'playing' for him, Kostas continued:

I never saw it as study or work and I still don't see it like that today. At least I manage to maintain the artistic aspect and get some personal enjoyment. I never studied music at all. I taught myself by playing with my brother. For the first seven years I only played in bands, where we did our own music.

For Athenian instrumentalists, 'doing your own music' refers to the rare occasions where they are in charge of the produced result of their performances. This includes choosing the repertoire, performing their own compositions as opposed to well-known 'hits', orchestrating the music according to their taste, and having the freedom to improvise. Although most musicians start by participating in these settings of 'democratic' music-making, the ones who succeed in entering the Athenian popular music industry are employed in larger productions characterised by more rigid hierarchies. Kostas offers his experience of 'working' for the first time. He was employed in the band of K-, a well-known male popular singer:

When I played with K-, this was my first 'job', but it was still more like a band, close to the style that I was used to. I mean the guys there [other instrumentalists] would not only do their job and go. They cared about how successful the result was musically, but they also tried to make sure you're properly in the group, you know, how much of yourself you're willing to put into the band, hang out with them, open up and all that. And these are things you don't see in regular 'work' settings. So it was good for easing me in.

Continuously in our discussion, Kostas drew this division between 'work' and 'bands'. Shifting between these two contexts was crucial for Kostas's survival as a professional musician. But remaining faithful to his musical aesthetics was conceptualised as an important ideological matter:

I had many gigs that I would call 'pure work,' you know what I mean? But I always tried to hold on to my ... well, I don't want to say 'dignity' ... but at least to do things that were compatible with my aesthetics. Not to drift too far away from it.

Kostas presented this quest for aesthetic integrity within a world of popular music labour as a struggle that he had to deal with repeatedly throughout his life course. His life narration was engrained with this dichotomy, making the description of life occurrences hardly distinguishable from didactic speeches:

I played for a *laikó magazí*⁷ for a while. And then the summer came and they proposed a good deal for the summer tour to us. It started troubling me, I was like 'wait, what am I doing?' This was not why I became a musician, and yes the money is great, but how long will I do this for? How long can I do it for? Because, after a point, you won't be as pure and innocent as when you started. Something is destroyed inside you. I know people who have gone half mad because of that! You can't keep a good aesthetic while playing at the *magaziá*.

The change from first to second person is quite telling. In order to explain his individual psycho/ideological struggle, Kóstas turns his life experience into a generalisable declaration.⁸ In doing that, he reveals what he regards as an untold truth: these popular music nightclubs can also serve as places of suffering for musicians. When I ask him what it is that makes 'working' in an Athenian nightclub such a negative experience, he replies:

You know what it is? It's Greece really. We're a fucked up culture. We call ourselves 'Mediterranean' but we really mean that we're kind of Middle Eastern in our mentality. And then we say we're 'Europeans' too, which in reality means that we're trying to become more Americanised. Fucked up culture and the music is the same.

Here, Kóstas deviates from his personal narrative in order to explain the context that makes 'working' for the popular music industry an undesirable component of a musician's life. This is seen as a result of the 'Greek mentality' and its ambiguous cultural dependencies on west-vs-east discourses.⁹ Whatever the formatting factors of this constraining setting are, however, Kóstas experiences it as a handicap for his individual aesthetic imperative:

We're trying to cater for all these different tastes. And at the same time, Greek people have this endless need for enjoyment that goes beyond their everyday problems. I mean we're in recession, right? The worst one in decades for Greece, so they say. But the nightclubs are full! You know, those ones that you and I work in, where people spend 200 euro each to watch their favourite singer. They cut down on groceries and heating, and they save for the clubs! People think 'I need to go out, spend some money, have some fun'. So when they go to the club, you're their entertainer, you need to be there for them. You're their bitch. They will need you on stage playing for six or seven hours. 'What? You're tired? I don't care, I'm tired too! I was working all morning, so shut up and play for me!' This is how they see us. Not as creative musicians or artists.

Kóstas's words resonate quite well with what Arlie Hochschild has called *emotional labour*, a term that describes settings where 'the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself.' (1983: 5) In Kóstas's view, what makes musical labour all the more burdening is the fact that it requires him to entertain people by suppressing his own sense of pleasure. According to Hochschild, emotional labour 'sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.' (1983: 7). In Kóstas's case this source is his personal musical taste. Later in our discussion, worried that the term 'aesthetics' is far too disengaged to describe his experience, Kóstas states:

All this 'aesthetic' discussion might sound a bit 'theoretical,' but ultimately all musicians...we're trying to be ok, you know? And the thing is, if we don't follow what we feel musically, sooner or later we'll have problems; physical and psychological problems.

For Kóstas, protecting his cultural integrity is more than an ideological construct; it is an existential necessity which ensures his psychological health. 'Playing' with bands that 'do their own music' is an antidote to the constraint of popular music labour. However, the eloquence with which he described these dichotomies and the vigilance of the justifications he used for his stances suggest that Kóstas was not uttering these words for the first time. I argue that the construction of the discursive space within which Kóstas features as a struggling individual, is an act of resistance in itself. By deconstructing the ideologies of the popular music industry, Kóstas momentarily (and within our specific discursive space) exorcises its authority over him. This discursive resistance is an act that musicians constantly perform in their private discussions and narratives. Althusser has argued that conformity with a 'ruling ideology' is necessary for any kind of practice to be possible, and that '[a]ll the agents of production [...] must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks "conscientiously"' (1972: 133). In this sense, although (or exactly because) musicians have to conform to the dominant ideologies of the music industry while performing in (and for) it, their private discourses serve as speech-acts that counteract this domination.

Dimítris: from singer to 'musician' – choosing your position

Dimítris is a 30-year-old multi-instrumentalist, singer and trained ethnomusicologist. He has worked as a backing musician for a number of well-established popular singers in Athens as well as composed and released his own music. I have known Dimítris for almost 20 years during which time we studied music, performed in bands and socialised extensively together.¹⁰

My interview with Dimítris concentrated on a specific transformation of his musical role that occurred in his early twenties. Dimítris had been singing on stage with different bands since his early teenage years. Growing up, everyone complimented his confident presence in front of the central microphone, and his competence as a band leader. After the end of secondary school, however, and increasingly during his academic studies in musicology, Dimítris was more attracted to playing instruments, a fact that eventually led him to reject of the role of the singer.

The music genres I listened to since I was a child¹¹ led me to work on my voice and the way I sung. This was what came natural to me; I was only playing an instrument in order to support my voice. For a long time I only identified myself as a singer. [...] I think the reason has to do with my home. My family only used the term 'song'. That's how we related to music. This, however, changed radically later in my life. Now, I consider myself more of a 'musician' or specifically an 'instrumentalist' than a 'singer'. I much prefer playing instruments than singing, and even when I sing, my mind concentrates on the arrangement, the harmony and the overall sound rather than my own voice.

This shift in musical roles signalled a profound change on Dimítris's identity. This change was manifest throughout the years in both a performative and a rhetorical way. Being his musical collaborator for many years, I had personally witnessed this transformation as we both became increasingly involved in the Athenian *ethnic jazz* scene.¹² Dimítris moved from the centre to the side of the stage, a move representing his resignation from the lead-singing role. He also started performing in a seated position, illustrating his concentration on the instrument while further disassociating him from the theatricality of the popular singer. At the same time, Dimítris started to verbally identify himself as an instrument player and express criticism towards the popular music circuit and its strategies of promotion and consumption. This change featured as a central theme in Dimítris's narrative. Interested in the course of this transformation, I asked him further: 'So did you decide at some point in your life that you wanted to be a musician rather than a singer?' Dimítris replied:

Yes, exactly. Well, I mean, it was a process for me that lasted about 10 years. I increasingly wanted to write, orchestrate and play music, which I would occasionally also perform using my voice. But I didn't want to conform myself to the role of the 'singer', with all its connotations.

Ioannis: What kinds of 'connotations' are these?

Dimítris: Because in order to be a singer you need to have a certain... ehm... extroversion, if one wants to describe it in a positive light. In reality, this means that you need to be bold and cocky, and to employ measures that never felt suitable for me as a person. [...] You know, there's a certain theatrical aspect to being a singer, captivating the audiences and pretending you're something different than what you really are. This pretentiousness is not valued among instrumentalists who care more about the sound and the music itself.

While describing this change in his performative role, Dimítris evokes a number of dilemmas concerning a musician's social identity. The 'cocky' and 'pretentious' singer is juxtaposed with the more modest instrumentalist who concentrates on his or her specific task: playing music. No matter how conscious this identification process was at the time when Dimítris was going through it, his current words make it more than a report of the past. This is an ideological construct of the present and it is here and now that Dimítris's words serve as an act of resistance to the system of popular music-making that he repudiates. I urged him to elaborate on this division between 'singers' and 'musicians', and asked him what he thought the role of formal music education was in maintaining it.¹³ Dimítris explained:

Look, as you know, there are major differences between the 'musician' and the 'singer'. One is the visible and obvious one, having to do with the role they play on stage, which can be seen by insiders and outsiders alike. There is also a more 'esoteric' difference though. Musicians intentionally distinguish themselves from singers. This is because in Greece, the role of the singer is mediated by a specific star-system. The mass appeal of the singer, achieved through advertisement and the media, soon became appalling for 'musicians'. The singer's 'deification' in Greek popular culture meant that the instrumentalist was marginalised. As a result, while singers gained in fame, they started losing their credibility and recognition within the music circles. This repulsive view of the singer was definitely transmitted to us in the Music Schools, by our teachers who were all skilled professional instrumentalists.

In this extract, Dimítris recognises both the historicity of this cultural antagonism and the way that he was introduced to it. Choosing, therefore, the position of the instrumentalist is in his words a conscious decision. Dimítris's description, however, also involves two conflicting sets of future aspirations: while the singer is striving for popular recognition, the Athenian instrumentalist is confined to the margins of the local industry.¹⁴ How did the gravity of such a conviction

affect Dimítris's life decisions? Did his fantasies of the future change along this process?

Of course, I had the dream of becoming famous. This fantasy is what gets everyone going. If anyone tells you that he first became a musician because he wanted to 'serve the art of music' he is a hypocrite. But at some point I realised that there was only so much I would do in order to chase that dream. [...] I had to satisfy the people who were above me in the hierarchy with whom I did not agree. This was an ideological problem for me. [...] Soon enough I came face to face with reality and I decided that there are requirements to becoming successful that comply with neither my ethics nor my musical training. So I set different priorities that took me away from the vision of the 'famous musician'.

The narrative of the betrayal of his fantasy again becomes a manifestation of identity politics for Dimítris. There were choices to be made, which were entangled with personal ethics and social ideologies. While discussing those choices, Dimítris illustrates his current social consciousness, which in turn was shaped by those exact choices. In other words, while actively constructing his life-narrative in the present, Dimítris performs an act of resistance to the hierarchies of the music business that defined his past.

Antónis: making sense of an uncommon power reversal

This section will follow the life-story of a jazz-trained saxophone player, and his unique encounter with the popular music industry. This analysis will provide a perspective of the music power struggles in a public context and the way that they are viewed by the individual musician. In contrast to the previous two sections, this case study will feature a musician in a rare triumph against the power-holders of the industry. By examining this I aim to reveal the way in which a victory within the milieu of social power serves the musician's narrative as a nodal point for assessing the meaning of his past experiences. In Antónis's storytelling his whole life-course is purposefully portrayed as building up towards a specific event, a collision point where experience and ideology clash and eventually become reconciled in his favour.

Antónis is a saxophone player in his mid-thirties. He was born in Tríkala, a town in Northern Greece, where he received his early music education:

I started with music when I was 12. My first instrument was the guitar, classical guitar, you know. But it didn't go great [laughing]. It was too hard for me. I mean, in order to be a classical guitar soloist? God! You need to give your every waking hour. Plus it was also hard professionally. My family wasn't rich or anything. What kind of work was I going to get in Tríkala as a classical

guitarist? So we [the family] decided that I was going to switch to the saxophone. For the army brass band, you know, I'd be a military musician. They were hiring a lot of people at that time.

Antónis described his earlier years of music education with contempt. Since he could not find a proper saxophone teacher in Tríkala, he started his training with a clarinetist. After a few frustrating years of 'very little technical advancement' Antónis was, eventually, directed to a saxophonist who resided in Lárissa, the nearest city. It was during one of his visits to Lárissa that he watched a concert of *The Blues Bug*, a reputable Athenian funk-soul band:

They had saxophones, trumpets, a whole brass section! There were like 15 people on stage. And it made me think, 'wait a minute, they are improvising and playing all this funky stuff, and I'm going to stay here and play marches for parades on national holidays? No way!' So I forgot about the army and everything. Because I realised how amazing the instrument was, you know what I mean? I thought, 'if they made it, I can make it too. I'll study hard; I'll do whatever I need to do.' I was 18 years old at that time.

A few years later Antónis moved to Athens. He started studying with a highly recognised jazz saxophonist and, simultaneously, undertook some training in classical and jazz music theory, composition and orchestration. He managed to gather various music degrees that secured him some sporadic teaching jobs and orchestra placements. But his finances were far from healthy:

When I arrived in Athens I was 22 years old. I needed to support myself. Especially after giving up on the army idea, I couldn't ask for my family's support. So I worked as a waiter for a while. Restaurants, coffee-shops, you name it. In the meantime I started getting hooked-up with different bands. We played funk, jazz, things like that. But these bands never pay, you know how it is. And I had a hard time arranging my schedule between gigs and nightshifts at work. I did that for a few years, but it was exhausting.

Luckily, after 2005, Antónis started participating in some more 'professional' music projects. He worked as a backing instrumentalist for a few successful singers, and managed to have a steady, if low, income. Finally, in the spring of 2008, Antónis received a quite promising proposal: N—, a well-known singer of the *laikó* genre, required a full horn section for his orchestra:

A colleague, trumpet player called me. N—, he said, wanted to make his orchestra more... 'glamorous.' You get the story. He wanted 5 horns! I accepted of course. I thought it would

be good money. I'd save a good bit, and then I'd be able to do whatever I wanted for the next year. It was only for the summertime. The band was really impressive. About 25 musicians, string sections and stuff, all in their black suits...it didn't feel like a *skyládiko*¹⁵ at all. But the music and the working hours were typical of a *skyládiko*. We played for 5 hours: midnight to 5 am.

This was Antónis's first experience of properly working 'in the night' (*sti nýhta*).¹⁶ Unfortunately, the collaboration did not go as smoothly as planned. The shows started on 29 May, 2008, after a month of unpaid rehearsals. But three weeks later, the whole horn section was fired. When I first asked Antónis about the reasons behind their lay-off, he focused on economic disputes:

They told us, 'you either stay for half the money, or you go.' They had a group of young Macedonians that were going to replace us. You see, we were getting 180 euro per night at that stage, and they found these kids who would play for 100.

Although the simplistic economic explanation of the lay-offs seemed to make some sense, this would be a rare occurrence in the popular music industry. If not for any reasons of professional ethics, firing the whole horn section a month into the show-season would present the music producers with the inconvenience of having to train the new instrumentalists. After questioning Antónis about that, he proceeded with what he considered a 'deeper' reason for the termination of their employment:

You see, the other musicians and the *maéستros*¹⁷ felt that their prestige was in danger. They were like 'these guys are better musicians than us. They spend less time on stage and get the same money! We better get rid of them.'

While the interview was being conducted, I remember reacting with scepticism to this part of the narrative. How grounded was Antónis's claim that the newcomers were 'better' than the senior members of the band? Surely, since the other musicians had been collaborating with N— for longer, they must have had more professional experience. I asked Antónis to explain what he meant by 'better musicians.' What exactly intimidated them? Antónis explained:

Well, you see they didn't have proper musical training. For example, they brought us these scores, and they were full of mistakes! We had to correct them. So when they saw that they couldn't justify their role as our superiors in the band, they felt threatened; especially the *maéستros*.

The justification of knowledge through the use of the term 'proper' (systematic and institutional) training clarified Antónis's assertion. What is worth noting here, therefore, is that the entire negotiation of power is entangled with a discussion of knowledge and competence.¹⁸ The endangered 'prestige' of the official power-holders (*maéستros*, senior musicians), and their failure to justify their positions within the social setting, are explained by Antónis as a result of their perceived lack in 'proper' training when compared to the horn section.

After being fired, the horn section decided to proceed to litigation. They contacted the official trade unionists, and got in touch with experienced lawyers who helped them file a lawsuit against the club-owner and the band manager. According to Antónis, although the singer was the main decision-maker behind the incident, he did not occupy an official position that would justify his prosecution in this case. In the lawsuit, the musicians maintained that they had been unjustifiably fired by the club's management, while their agreement dictated that they would be employed for the whole summer season. Moreover, they supported that at that late time, midway through the summer club-season, it would have been impossible for them to find any employment. Therefore, they claimed monetary compensation that would cover both their unpaid rehearsal hours, and their loss from the rest of the concert season. Although they had no written contract, the lawyer assured them that the court would recognise the validity of a 'verbal contract', as dictated by the nature of their occupation.

In Antónis's account, the subsequent trial unfolded like a parody. The club's production team testified in front of the judge that 'the horn section was fired because they were not up to the required playing standards'. Significantly, they chose to direct the litigation again to a matter of competence and skill. 'What? All of them?' The judge responded. 'And it took you one month of rehearsals and another three weeks of shows to discover their incompetence?' she allegedly remarked. According to Antónis, the judge proceeded to explicitly mock the representatives of the production team: 'The whole courtroom was laughing for about half an hour.' He quoted some of the judge's comments: 'So what was wrong with them exactly? Were they playing out of tune? Out of rhythm? What? Your report here doesn't make it clear.' Later, she reportedly asserted: 'From the musicians' CVs, I see that each of them have a long list of music degrees, and they are employed in the orchestra of ERT [Greek National Broadcasting Network]. What kind of musicians does Mr N— [the singer] need after all, if they are "not up to his standard?"' The trial concluded with the judge deciding in favour of the laid-off musicians. According to Antónis, the amount of money that they received as compensation was larger than what they would have made even in the most optimistic scenario of a successful season at the club.

This case study provides an unusual example in the music industry. Instrumentalists are rarely fired during a playing season, but even when they are, they seldom consider prosecuting their employers. This strategy would generally be considered catastrophic for a career that is largely based on personal relationships. What makes this case worth examining, however, is the way in which it serves Antónis's narrative as a triumphal incident. The power reversal in the court case is presented by Antónis as an optimistic occurrence, one where the instrumentalists received a much needed recognition. In this sense, the incident becomes the social equivalent of a moment of musical 'play': the musician succeeds in momentarily subverting the typical social order. It is the rareness of such an event that makes it an ideal medium for discursive resistance. In narrating this incident, Antónis not only recounts one of his few moments of pride during his involvement in the popular music scene, but also advocates his decision to fight against the established hierarchies of the popular music industry. In this effort, he carefully orchestrates the protagonists of this narrative (the popular singer, the entrepreneurs, and the female judge) and their words in order to serve his subversive discourse.¹⁹ In fact, one of the elements of the story consistently stressed by Antónis was the judge's gender. I take his frequent smiles when referring to the words of the *dikastína* (female judge), as a subtle suggestion that this was a dual power reversal: not only the subaltern instrumentalists won the battle against their dominators, but they did so with the help of a female judge.

Conclusion

At the early stages of my research, I anticipated that it would be difficult to convince my informants to share their life stories with me. I also expected the presence of an audio recorder, a piece of equipment notorious among musicians for its ability to decontextualise performances (musical or verbal) to make things worse. I feared that they would resort to clichés about communal music-making, praise the professional circuit within which they make their living, and keep their dissident opinions for less formal settings. As it turned out, not only they did not hesitate to share their life-stories in great detail, but they found the process 'enjoyable' and 'cathartic.' As Kóstas said at the end of our interview,

It was weird, you know, people usually tell you to shut your mouth and play! I don't know if what I said was useful at all. And how would I, since I didn't shut up long enough for you to ask any questions! But it was fun for me anyway.

Throughout this article, I have argued that these life narratives served my informants as acts of discursive resistance. By saying this, I don't mean to imply that the narratives themselves, or the interview process for that

matter, provided them with direct ways of defying the hegemonic forces that shape their social experiences. I am, rather, suggesting that their rhetorical constructs serve as a paradigmatic (if private) language of opposition. Thus, to echo Bakhtin, the above words are populated with a 'semantic and expressive intention.' (1981: 293) My informants' narratives are vehicles of a rhetoric with a specific purpose to challenge what is perceived as a perverse system of authority. The evocation of this rhetoric through the discussion of nodal life incidents helps musicians to achieve a sense of balance between their initial fantasies, the chronology of their social experiences and their current ideologies.

Music ethnography demands two kinds of listening. Participant observation in music entails a close process of listening for diverse sociocultural cues that can be easily missed within the turmoil of performance. On the other hand, the observation of interview performances – the meta-process including listening to, transcribing, translating, indexing, and analysing interviews – requires a different aural sensitivity; one that listens for the active ways in which informants construct their self-perception and socially position themselves through speech. A finalised ethnographic text cannot but be analytical; therefore an ethnographer can never claim to unequivocally represent his or her interlocutors. I do hope, however, that my attention to the life-stories and social ideologies of Athenian musicians has made a good case for an anthropology that listens to the individual voices and an ethnographic text that facilitates their discursive resistances.

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Notes:

¹ For a classic outline of poststructuralist approaches to culture, see Rosaldo (1989).

² In Nigel Rapport's words, '[a]gainst the likes of structuralist positings of "deep enculturation", poststructuralist positings of "habitus" and "hegemony", or psychoanalytic positings of the "unconscious", it must be argued that neither the inner organisation of individuals' possibly multiple identities nor their content is removed from their own manipulation and control.' (2003: 31-32) It is worth mentioning, however, that the debate is one of analytical attention rather than understanding. Even in its earliest stages, social science was aware of individual agency and its role in social change. In his discussion of 'social facts',

for example, Durkheim asserts: 'Even when in fact I can struggle free from these rules and successfully break them, it is never without being forced to fight against them. Even if in the end they are overcome, they make their constraining power sufficiently felt in the resistance that they afford.' (1982 [1895]: 51-52) The analytical strategy of 'distilling' cultural phenomena of their individual nuances practiced by early social sciences, has led to a common misunderstanding that functionalism and structuralism were blind as far as human agency is concerned.

³ I find the concept of the 'social imaginary' very useful in describing human motivation as it is situated within social-historical-cultural milieux. This draws on Althusser's definition of ideology as the 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.' (1972: 153) For a discussion of the imaginary as a mode of social belonging and a force of cultural change, see Castoriadis (1987, 1997), Gaonkar (2002) and Taylor (2004).

⁴ Pavlos Kavouras (1999) has very successfully discussed the performative aspect of narrative in the biography of a folk musician in Northern Greece.

⁵ The term describes instrumentalists who make a living mainly by performing in backing bands accompanying popular Greek singers.

⁶ This view is in accordance with John Gledhill's (1994: 80-93) portrayal of resistance, where the effectiveness of undermining power structures is not a necessary prerequisite. It is, rather, the expression of 'antagonism' (Gledhill 1994: 92) in the presented rhetorics that qualifies them as counter-hegemonic.

⁷ Nightclub that features the 'urban-folk' music genre. *Magazí* literally translates as 'shop', a degrading term used by musicians to label the clubs that support the commercialised music genres.

⁸ Lisette Josephides (2008) has also elaborated on this technique of blending 'narrative' and 'paradigmatic' speech, which she has found to be a common feature in Papua New Guinean life-stories.

⁹ The West-vs-East debate has tantalised Greek culture since the foundation of the independent Greek state in the 1830s. This theme has been widely explored by social studies of Greece, in relation to cultural politics (Herzfeld 1987; 1995; Danforth 1984) rhetorics of Europeanisation (Faubion 1993; Calotychos 2003) and Greek people's view of neighbouring nations (Theodossopoulos 2006, 2007; Kirtsoglou 2006). For a discussion of the Greekness-versus-cosmopolitanism debate and its contesting manifestations within the community of Athenian professional musicians, see Tsioulakis (2011b).

¹⁰ Although my discussions with Dimítris have influenced my research in many and profound ways, the extracts used for the needs of this article are taken from a specific interview that we conducted in January 2011.

¹¹ Dimítris is referring here to *éntehno* ('art-song') and *laikó* ('urban-folk'), the main genres of Greek popular song.

¹² The roots of *ethnic-jazz* can be found in a wider multicultural sensibility that arose in urban Greece during the nineties and manifested in a general taste for the 'exotic' within the fields of music, decoration, and cuisine. Although within some music circles *ethnic* was used as a denigrating term to describe a blend between traditional and contemporary musical idioms that were not well articulated (Kallimopoulou 2009: 171), in the wider Athenian musical context the word *ethnic* was used to denote world-fusion performances by both local and international artists. The *ethnic* aesthetic was followed by a number of Greek jazzmen who integrated elements of the wider Balkan and Mediterranean traditions into their music, which was almost exclusively instrumental. For a discussion of *ethnic-jazz* and its aesthetic debates, see Tsioulakis (2011b) and Dawe (2007).

¹³ Probing questions concerning ideological divisions can be a risky strategy in personal interviews. Jonathan Skinner has explored the way that the ethnographic interviewer often works as an 'opportunist' who pushes the boundaries between data collection and personal or even intrusive questions (2010: 115). Although semi-structured interviews (such as the one I had with Dimítris) can provide an ideal discursive space for unfolding and clarifying such ideologies, the process often demands a level of articulation that the interviewee might never have consciously attempted before. In all of the described cases, however, I discovered that my questions were welcomed by the interviewees who enjoyed my interest in their idiosyncratic views.

¹⁴ The dichotomy between singers and instrumentalists is a very powerful cultural construct that permeates urban Greek music-making. Surprisingly, while much of the literature on Greek music has focused on the singers and songwriters who have marked its history (Tragaki 2005; Papanikolaou 2007; Cowan, 1990) the backing instrumentalists have been consistently ignored by Greek music ethnography. Even Despina Michael's article (2009), which deals with an extensive range of private interviews with musicians, focuses on the commonalities between their rhetorics of creativity ignoring the age-long antagonism between instrument-players and their singing colleagues.

¹⁵ The word literally translates as 'dog's den'. It is commonly used as a degrading term for the *laikó* (urban-folk) song genre and the nightclubs where it is featured.

¹⁶ This phrase, very popular among musicians for describing their experiences, associates professional musicianship with late-hour labour. The 'night' (*nyhta*) is projected as both a rite of passage and a source of 'street credit' for a musician, as it is considered the sole context within which one can effectively earn a living.

¹⁷ The term is used within the nightclub circuit to describe the musical director of the backing band.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu (1986) has argued that the possession of knowledge (cultural capital), especially in its institutionalised form, serves as a central aspect of the everyday micro-struggles of power. It is no wonder, then, that musicians exercise claims to knowledge in their discourses of resistance.

¹⁹ Discussing illness narratives, Byron Good (1994) and Jonathan Skinner (2000) have also shown how patients actively construct their personal histories as fiction, where the efficacy of events and actors becomes unveiled within a specific interpretive framework with a clear purpose of recounting and fighting illness. In these contexts '[n]arratives are organised as predicament and striving and as an unfolding of human desire.' (Good 1994: 164)